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Supervenience and property-identical divine-command theory

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Abstract: **Property-identical divine-command theory (PDCT) is the view that *being obligatory* is identical to *being commanded by God* in just the way that being water is identical to being H_2O. If these identity statements are true, then they express necessary a posteriori truths. PDCT has been defended in Robert M. Adams (1987) and William Alston (1990). More recently Mark C. Murphy (2002) has argued that property-identical divine-command theory is inconsistent with two well-known and well-received theses: the free-command thesis and the supervenience thesis. I show that Murphy's argument is vitiated by mistaken assumptions about the substitutivity of metaphysical identicals in contexts of supervenience. The free-command thesis and the supervenience thesis therefore pose no serious threat to PDCT.**

Property-identical divine-command theory (PDCT) maintains that the property *being obligatory* is identical to the property *being commanded by God*. According to PDCT, being obligatory is identical to being commanded by God in just the way that being water is identical to being H_2O, or being gold is identical to being the element with atomic number 79.[1] If these identity statements are true, then they express a posteriori necessary truths. Of course, it remains a matter of some debate whether these identity statements are true. The so-called discovery that being obligatory is identical to being commanded by God might be badly mistaken or just a hoax. After all, many utilitarians and ethical egoists claim to have discovered instead that being obligatory is identical to being maximally beneficial or that being obligatory is identical to being most in one's self-interest.[2] Should we learn that the utilitarians or the ethical egoists are right after all, then it is an a posteriori necessary truth that being obligatory is identical to being maximally beneficial or that being obligatory is identical to being most in one's self-interest, and so on.

PDCT rejects the proposal that being obligatory is conceptually identical to being commanded by God. Highly competent users of moral language – Mill, Bentham, Kant, Moore, and Ross, for instance – provide compelling evidence that

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these terms do not have precisely the same meaning. These moral philosophers understood well the meanings of these terms and yet they never converged on the conclusion that being obligatory is identical to being commanded by God. PDCT claims that this is just what we should expect. Conceptual relations in moral language do not in general reveal important metaphysical relations. The property-identical formulation of divine-command theory finds its best defence in Robert M. Adams (1987) and has been commended more recently in William Alston (1990) as a promising formulation of divine-command theory.[3]

Current work in moral theory bodes less well for PDCT. In a fascinating new argument Mark C. Murphy contends that two well-received and highly plausible philosophical theses pose an extremely serious threat to property-identical divine-command theory.[4] The initial thesis states that God's commands are free only if those commands are not entirely fixed by non-moral facts in the world. Call that the free-command thesis. Among God's free actions we should include the actualization of the world, the creation of rational beings, and perhaps various miraculous interventions in the natural world. But the free-command thesis entails that, in addition to these free actions, God has some freedom to command actions and agents simply as he desires or wishes.

The second thesis expresses the well-known meta-ethical view that all moral properties supervene on non-moral properties. The thesis is widely regarded among moral theorists as an a priori or platitudinous moral truth.[5] Call this the supervenience thesis. According to the supervenience thesis, any two possible worlds that are exactly alike in all of their non-moral features must also be exactly alike in all of their moral features. For instance, if it is true that moral obligation supervenes on facts describing certain mental states and their causes – happiness, for example, or contentment or pleasure – then every world alike in facts about such mental states and their causes will be alike in their moral obligations.

According to Murphy, the free-command thesis and the supervenience thesis together entail that property-identical divine-command theory is false. In the next section I examine and present Murphy's argument against PDCT. I show, in the third section, that two central inferences in the argument include mistaken assumptions about the substitutivity of metaphysical identicals in contexts of supervenience. I conclude that the argument is unsound and poses no serious threat to property-identical divine-command theory. I offer some closing comments in the final section.

The argument against property-identical divine-command theory

The free-command thesis states that God's commands are free only if those commands are not entirely fixed by the non-moral facts. The set of non-moral facts contains every fact obtaining in the world including non-moral facts about the thoughts, actions, desires and choices of God. We should

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include among the non-moral facts, for instance, the fact that God wants His creatures to be perfect and the fact that God desires that all of His creatures enjoy the beatific vision, and so on. The free-command thesis urges us to believe that God is not free in commanding agents and actions *unless* the totality of these facts does not entirely fix what God commands. Murphy argues as follows:

> What I mean by saying that God has at least some freedom in commanding is that even if the world were in relevant respects otherwise the same, God might have given slightly different commands: God could have given an at least slightly smaller or larger number of such commands, or could have given commands at least slightly different in content, or could have given commands to an at least slightly different group of people. What God commands is not entirely fixed by the way the world otherwise is.[6]

Suppose T represents the total set of non-moral facts *apart from* God's commands. The free-command thesis then asserts that God freely commands person S to do action A at time t_n only if both (1) and (2) are true.

(1) The totality of facts T hold at t_n and God commands S to do A at t_n; and,

(2) It is possible that the (same) totality of facts T hold at t_n and God does not command S to do A at t_n.

Condition (1) expresses the actual command of God at t_n on the total set of non-moral facts, T at t_n. Condition (2) ensures that the command of God at t_n on the same facts T might have been slightly different. God might have commanded person R to do A at t_n, for instance, or God might have commanded S to do B at t_n. Perhaps God might have commanded nothing at all at t_n. Condition (2) permits that as well. It is the wide range of possible commands guaranteed in condition (2) that Murphy contends is necessary to God's freedom in commanding.

Let's assume for *reductio ad absurdum* that PDCT is true. Property-identical divine-command theory asserts that it is a necessary truth that being commanded by God is identical to being obligatory. If we let 'N' symbolize metaphysical necessity and '≡' symbolize material equivalence then property-identical DCT entails among other things that proposition (3) is true.

(3) N(God commands S to do A at $t_n \equiv$ it is obligatory that S do A at t_n).

In English (3) states that necessarily God commands S to do A at t_n, if and only if it is obligatory that S do A at t_n.

We can now draw two conclusions from free-command thesis and PDCT. We invoke a principle of substitution for metaphysical identicals to infer (4) from propositions (3) and (1).

(4) The totality of facts T hold at t_n and it is obligatory that S do A at t_n.

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Similarly, the substitution of necessary equivalents governs the inference from propositions (3) and (2) to proposition (5).

(5) It is possible that the (same) totality of facts T hold at t_n and it is not obligatory that S do A at t_n.

But we quickly find that propositions (4) and (5) are inconsistent with the supervenience thesis. Conjoining propositions (4) and (5), we arrive at (6).

(6) The totality of non-moral facts T hold at t_n and it is obligatory that S do A at t_n and it is *possible* that the totality of non-moral facts T hold at t_n and it is not obligatory that S do A at t_n.

We know that the supervenience thesis entails that any two worlds exactly alike in non-moral facts must be exactly alike in moral facts.[7] According to propositions (4) and (5) the set T includes the total set of non-moral facts. And so every possible world that has the set of non-moral facts described in T must have the same moral facts. The supervenience thesis therefore entails that (7) is true.

(7) The total set non-moral facts T hold at t_n and it is obligatory that S do A at t_n only if it is *impossible* that the total set of non-moral facts T hold at t_n and it is not obligatory that S do A at t_n.

It should be clear that propositions (6) and (7) cannot both be true. And so we must reject at least one of the following theses: the free-command thesis, property-identical divine-command theory or the supervenience thesis. Let's agree that the free-command thesis and the supervenience thesis are too plausible to reject. The remaining option is to reject property-identical divine-command theory. That concludes the argument against property-identical divine-command theory.

Two challenges to the argument

The free-command thesis asserts that God's commands are free *only if* those commands do not supervene on non-moral facts in the world. But Murphy has argued that being commanded by God *does* supervene on non-moral facts because being morally obligatory supervenes on non-moral facts (supervenience thesis) and being commanded by God is metaphysically identical to being morally obligatory (PDCT). Murphy offers this argument:

> Assume that PDCT is true and that the moral strongly supervenes on the non-moral. *Being obligatory* thus strongly supervenes on the non-moral. Necessarily then whether an act is obligatory is wholly fixed by a set of properties that does not include *being obligatory*. Now, if PDCT is true, then, *being obligatory* just is *being commanded by God*. And so, by substitution, necessarily, whether an act is commanded by God is wholly fixed by a set of properties that does not include *being commanded by God*.[8]

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Slightly more formally, the inference that Murphy offers here includes the following two premises and conclusion.

(a) The property of being obligatory is metaphysically identical to the property of being commanded by God.
(b) The property of being obligatory supervenes on a set of non-moral properties that do not include the property of being obligatory.
(c) Therefore the property being commanded by God supervenes on a set of properties that do not include the property of being commanded by God.

The modal propositions in this passage follow from the strong supervenience claims. So we could add to the argument the conclusion that necessarily whether God commands an act is wholly fixed by a set of properties that do not include being commanded by God. We could also add the premise that necessarily whether an act is obligatory is wholly fixed by a set of properties that does not include being obligatory. But these propositions follow directly from (c) and (b) respectively.

The inference from (a) and (b) to (c) appeals to a principle of substitution for metaphysical identicals. But the argument is invalid and it is not difficult to see why premises (a) and (b) are consistent with the proposition that the property of being obligatory supervenes on non-moral properties that *include* the property of being commanded by God. And there are very good reasons for defenders of property-identical divine-command theory to hold this view. It is exactly this position that makes the freedom to command diverse actions consistent with the supervenience thesis. Recall that T represents the total set of non-moral facts *apart from* God's commands. God freely commands person S to do action A at time t_n only if both (1) and (2) are true.

(1) The totality of facts T hold at t_n and God commands S to do A at t_n;

and,

(2) It is possible that the (same) totality of facts T hold at t_n and God does not command S to do A at t_n.

If the commands of God are among the non-moral facts on which moral obligation supervenes, then it is possible that (1) and (2) are true and God is free in commanding. And so there is no violation of the free-command thesis. But we can also maintain that moral obligation supervenes on non-moral facts. Contrary to Murphy's claim, substitution in (1) and (2) does not yield (4) and (5) above. It rather yields (4*) and (5*).

(4*) The totality of facts T1 hold at t_n and it is obligatory that S do A at t_n,

and,

(5*) It is possible that the totality of facts T2 hold at t_n and it is not obligatory that S do A at t_n.

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And the propositions in (4*) and (5*) are consistent with the supervenience thesis since the total facts in T1 are not the same as the total facts in T2. T1 contains the additional non-moral fact that God commands S to do A at t_n. And T2 contains the additional non-moral fact that God does not command S to do A at t_n. And so we find that divine-command theory is consistent with both the supervenience thesis and the free-command thesis.

But could it be true both that the property of being obligatory is metaphysically identical with being commanded by God and that being obligatory supervenes on being commanded by God? Certainly. It is well known that metaphysical identicals stand in the supervenience relation. The property of being water and the property of being H_2O are metaphysical identicals, and being water supervenes on being H_2O. The property of being gold and the property of having atomic number 79 are metaphysical identicals and being gold supervenes on having atomic number 79. And there are numerous other examples. So nothing precludes metaphysical identicals from standing in the supervenience relation.

Defenders of property-identical divine-command theory can therefore reject the inference from premises (a) and (b) to (c). Given that the property of being obligatory supervenes on the property of being commanded by God, premises (a) and (b) at best permit an inference to (d).[9]

(d) Therefore the property being commanded by God supervenes on a set of properties that *does* include the property of being commanded by God.

But (d) presents no problem for the consistency of the free-command thesis, the supervenience thesis and divine-command theory.

There is in general good reason for caution when substituting metaphysical identicals in contexts of supervenience. The supervenience relation is reflexive and transitive but it is *not* symmetric and in most interesting cases – for instance in value theory – it is *asymmetric*.[10] So there are several ways in which substitutivity can fail to preserve truth in contexts of supervenience.

Consider again the metaphysical identity between the properties being water and being H_2O. It is a metaphysical necessity that something is water if and only if it is H_2O. And of course the proposition expressed in (8) is true.

(8) The property of being water supervenes on the property being H_2O.

But the substitution of metaphysical identicals permits us to infer (9).

(9) The property of being H_2O supervenes on the property of being water.

Using unrestricted substitution we can prove that being water supervenes on being H_2O, if and only if being H_2O supervenes on being water. But that is true only if the relation is supervenience is symmetric. Since the relation of

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supervenience is not symmetric this inference is not valid. And so the unrestricted substitution of metaphysical identicals results in invalid inferences.

More interesting for this discussion is that the relation of dependence in value contexts is asymmetric. So in value contexts the unrestricted substitution of metaphysical equivalents can lead from a true claim about supervenience directly to a false claim about supervenience. Here is Jaegwon Kim:

> In most cases of interest supervenience seems in fact asymmetric; for example, although many have claimed the supervenience of valuational on non-valuational properties, it is apparent that the converse does not hold. Similarly, although psychophysical supervenience is an arguable view, it would be manifestly implausible to hold that the physical supervenes on the psychological. This asymmetry of supervenience may well be the core of the idea of asymmetric dependence we associate with the supervenience relation.[11]

As noted above, in contexts of supervenience the unrestricted substitution of metaphysical identicals guarantees that if A supervenes on B then the converse holds as well. Two applications of substitutivity yield the conclusion that B supervenes on A. But, as Kim notes, the supervenience of valuational and psychophysical properties describes an asymmetric relation. So the converse does not hold. And so we find again that the unrestricted substitution of metaphysical identicals in contexts of supervenience is invalid.

Property-identical divine-command theory does entail that being obligatory is metaphysically identical to being commanded by God. But it is a mistake to conclude that being obligatory supervenes on non-moral facts that do not include being obligatory *only if* being commanded by God supervenes on non-moral facts that do not include being commanded by God. Defenders of property identical divine-command theory can hold both that being obligatory is metaphysically identical to being commanded by God and that the property of being obligatory supervenes on the property being commanded by God. And since supervenience is a reflexive relation, divine-command theorists can further conclude that the property of being commanded by God supervenes on the property of being commanded by God.

There is a more serious mistake in the argument against property-identity divine-command theory. Here is Murphy:

> [W]e want to allow that God's commanding is free, and that what God commands us to do, we are obligated to do. In one possible world, God commands us to perform religious ritual R_1, and we are obligated to perform it; in another possible world, God commands us to perform a distinct ritual R_2 – though R_2 in itself differs from R_1 in no morally relevant way – and we are thus obligated to perform R_2. Our being obligated to perform one of these rituals or the other does not supervene, then, on the intrinsic features of the rituals. … we want to say here that the property that distinguishes the required ritual from the non-required ritual in each world is *being commanded by God*. But that appeal is precisely what the defender of a property identity formulation of PDCT is barred from making. By *identifying* the property *being*

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> *obligatory* with the property *being commanded by God*, defenders of the property identity formulation of PDCT remove the property *being commanded by God* from the set of non-moral properties on which the property *being obligatory can supervene*.[12]

But the conclusion of this argument simply does not follow.[13] As we noted above many paradigm examples of supervenience include properties that are metaphysically identical. Being water is *identical* to being H_2O *and* being water *supervenes* on being H_2O; being a tiger is identical to being a member of a certain species S, *and* being a tiger supervenes on being a member of species S. And so there is no reason to conclude that identifying the property being obligatory with the property being commanded by God removes being commanded by God from the set of non-moral properties on which the property being obligatory can supervene.

But suppose it is argued instead that being obligatory is a *moral* property and since being commanded by God is identical to being obligatory, it follows that being commanded by God is also a moral property. Therefore, being commanded by God is not in the set of non-moral properties on which being obligatory can supervene. The initial problem with this particular argument is that perfectly analogous arguments are invalid. For instance, being water is not a chemical property, and since being H_2O is identical with being water, it follows that being H_2O cannot be among the chemical properties on which being water supervenes. But obviously the property of being H_2O is among the chemical properties on which being water supervenes. So this argument is clearly invalid.

And it is at least as problematic that the argument Murphy offers here is circular. Here is a perfectly parallel inference that leads us to the opposite conclusion. Being commanded by God is a descriptive property and since being obligatory is identical to being commanded by God, it follows that being obligatory is a descriptive property. Therefore being commanded by God might well be in the set of descriptive properties on which being obligatory supervenes. So the argument offers no good reason to conclude that the property of being commanded by God is not a descriptive property on which the property being obligatory supervenes.

So defenders of PDCT are not committed to the conclusion that being commanded by God is a moral property. Rather defenders of property-identical divine-command theory have the option to adopt the position that moral obligation supervenes on a set of descriptive properties that includes the property of being commanded by God. But divine-command theorists also have the option to hold that moral properties just are descriptive properties. This is a position defended in Frank Jackson, for instance: 'ethical properties *are* descriptive properties. For it is a consequence of the way that the ethical supervenes on the descriptive that any claim about how things are made in the ethical vocabulary makes no distinction among the possibilities that cannot in principle be made in purely descriptive vocabulary.'[14]

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So those who defend the position that being obligatory is identical to being commanded by God might well advance the thesis that being obligatory also supervenes on being commanded by God. There is certainly nothing in the supervenience thesis or the free-command thesis that prevents them from taking such a position. Worlds that are otherwise the same in non-moral fact might therefore include different commands and so there is no violation of the free-command thesis. And moral obligations might be entirely fixed by the set of non-moral facts and so there is no violation of the supervenience thesis. The general argument against property-identical divine-command theory therefore offers no interesting reason to abandon that important meta-ethical theory.[15]

Concluding remarks

Property-identical divine-command theorists can hold the position that the property of being obligatory is metaphysically identical to the property of being commanded by God and that being obligatory supervenes on being commanded by God. As a result the inference from (3) and (1) to (4) is invalid and so is the inference from (3) and (2) to (5). The set of non-moral facts in (4) includes the additional fact that God commands A at t_n, and the set of non-moral facts in (5) includes the fact that God does not command A at t_n. So the total set of non-moral facts are not the same in propositions (4) and (5). The propositions are therefore consistent with the supervenience thesis.

The metaphysical identity of being obligatory and being commanded by God does not – contrary to Murphy's contention – preclude the possibility that being obligatory supervenes on being commanded by God. Defenders of PDCT can hold that being obligatory is entirely fixed by the non-moral facts that include facts about God's commands. The supervenience thesis is therefore satisfied. Defenders can also hold that God's commands are included in the set of non-moral facts and not entirely fixed by them. The free-command thesis is therefore satisfied. These theses are not inconsistent with the metaphysical identity of being obligatory and being commended by God. We should therefore conclude that Murphy's argument poses no serious threat to property-identical divine-command theory.[16]

Notes

1. See Robert Adams 'Divine command metaethics modified again', in his *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 139 ff. Adams's theory takes ethical wrongness as primitive. He writes: 'My new divine command theory of ethical wrongness, then, is that ethical wrongness *is* (i.e. is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. I regard this as a metaphysically necessary, but not an analytic or a priori truth. Because it is not a conceptual analysis, this claim is not relative to a religious sub-community of the larger linguistic community. It purports to be the correct theory of the nature of the ethical wrongness that *everybody* (or almost everybody) is talking about.'

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Adams does note that the metaphysical identity of being obligatory and being commanded by God differs epistemologically from the metaphysical identity of being water and being H_2O. We don't learn that that being obligatory is being commanded by God in the same way that we learn that being water is being H_2O. See *ibid.*, n. 3* for a brief discussion of some disanalogies.

2. There is no question that *if* being obligatory is identical to being commanded by God, then it is necessary that being obligatory is identical to being commanded by God. If the antecedent of that conditional is true, then all agree that we cannot discover that being obligatory is not identical to being commanded by God. But that antecedent is just what utilitarians and ethical egoists claim is false. Their claim is that we have made no such discovery. And there certainly is legitimate dispute over whether it has been discovered that being obligatory is identical to being commanded by God.
3. See Adams 'Divine command metaethics modified again', and William Alston 'Some suggestions for divine command theorists', in Michael Beaty (ed.) *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).
4. See Mark C. Murphy 'A trilemma for divine command theory', *Faith and Philosophy*, **19** (2002), 22–31.
5. See Michael Smith *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 40ff, for a discussion of what Smith calls the platitudes regarding the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. See also Frank Jackson *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 119ff.
6. See Murphy, 'A trilemma for divine command theory', 23.
7. It is assumed here that moral features *strongly* supervene on non-moral features. The assumption can only help Murphy's argument against property-identical DCT. Following Jaegwon Kim we will say that a set of properties A strongly supervenes on a set of properties B if and only if necessarily, for any object x and any property F in A, if x has F then there exists a property G in B such that x has G and necessarily if any y has G then it has F. See Jaegwon Kim 'Concepts of supervenience', in *idem Supervenience and the Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 64.
8. See Murphy, 'A trilemma for divine command theory', 25 (Murphy's emphasis). Murphy actually uses the abbreviation 'DCT'. To distinguish traditional versions of divine-command theory from Robert Adams's modified version I use the abbreviation 'PDCT'. For continuity I make this minor alteration in Murphy's text.
9. Of course, without the assumption that the property of being obligatory supervenes on the property of being commanded by God premises (a) and (b) entail neither (c) nor (d).
10. See Kim 'Concepts of supervenience', 67. He notes there that it is obvious that supervenience relations are transitive, reflexive but not symmetric.
11. *Ibid.*, 65 ff.
12. See Murphy, 'A trilemma for divine command theory', 29–30 (Murphy's emphasis).
13. It is not at all obvious why we would want to say 'the property that distinguishes the required ritual from the non-required ritual in each world is being commanded by God'. But the assumption seems to be that the free-command thesis requires that being commanded by God be among the non-moral properties distinguishing worlds in which one ritual is obligatory and worlds in which another ritual is obligatory. Indeed it is possible – *pace* Murphy – that God's commands are among those non-moral facts. But there are other possibilities that would serve as well. Worlds that vary in their obligatory rituals might be worlds in which non-moral facts about God's *wishes or wants* are different. God wishes to command one ritual in one world and wishes to command another in other worlds. In that case facts about God's wishes or wants are among the non-moral facts that distinguish worlds containing differences in required ritual. This is perfectly compatible with the free-command thesis.
14. Compare Jackson *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, 118–125. But if ethical properties are descriptive properties it does not follow that understanding the meaning of 'being obligatory' would reveal that it means being commanded by God. The equivalence is rather the result of an empirical investigation into how the predicate 'being obligatory' is correctly applied in the world. There is room for debate about how the predicate is correctly applied among utilitarians, ethical egoists, and divine-command theorists. Jackson defends the position that the global supervenience of the ethical on the natural has as a consequence that any sentence about how things are ethically is equivalent to some sentence about how things are descriptively. Though I am not urging that defenders of property-identical DCT should (or should not) adopt such a position, it is true that such a position is open to those who defend property-identical DCT.

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15. Would it follow that actions are right because they are commanded by God (and not the converse)? The fact that an action is commanded by God is *one* of the non-moral facts on which on obligation supervenes. So it does not follow that actions are right if God commands those actions, but it does follow that actions are right *only if* God commands them.
16. Many thanks to Mark Bernstein, Peter Byrne, Mark C. Murphy, and an anonymous *Religious Studies* referee.

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